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To: Committee, Indigenous Affairs (SEN)
Subject: Submission to select committee on the Administration of Indigenous Affairs

The Secretary
Senate Select Committee on the Administration of Indigenous Affairs
Parliament House, Canberra

22 July 2004

Dear Secretary

We wish to take this opportunity to make a submission to your committee's inquiry on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Amendment Bill 2004 and proposed changes to the administration of Commonwealth Indigenous Affairs policy.

As far as we can ascertain, the key issues are:

- 1 whether to retain the principle of an elected body or to form an advisory panel, and
- 2 whether Indigenous peoples should have the right to self-determination or be required to accept a paternalistic management of their affairs, however well meaning that may be.

We strongly support the right of Indigenous people to elect their own governing body. We affirm our belief that paternalism is totally out-of-date and out-of-step with their ideals, that it will lessen their welfare and that it represents principles and practices that the rest of Australia's population would not accept if applied to themselves. To that extent it is discriminatory.

In the education field we both worked with Aboriginal students and staff over many decades from the 1950s to the 1980s. We were engaged in a wide variety of educational programs ranging from small schools to secondary schools and from local adult education outreach centres to full-time courses in major TAFE colleges. Successful outcomes were achieved when Indigenous people made decisions jointly with non-Indigenous providers. Our management goals included the employment of as many Aboriginal staff as possible to provide the programs, and such programs were far more successful than others.

For example, an Indigenous teacher working with pupils who had very limited English, or none, was able to manage early childhood classes bi-lingually, enabling the acquisition of English far more satisfactorily. At a different level, when we were recruiting full-time Aboriginal TAFE teachers, the Aboriginal members of the selection panel made decisions with a depth of understanding that non-Indigenous members could not match.

It was interesting that the same principle of avoiding paternalism that was applied to Aboriginal education was also essential in educating students with a wide range of disabilities. Through our experiences, including our mistakes, we learnt that genuine decision-making power and self-determination are basic, unless a lot of time and resources are to be wasted.

So, the principles we now urge you to espouse are that a new body should be formed through an election process and not by appointment so that it will:

- be open, transparent and accountable to A&TSI people
- reflect Indigenous peoples' goals, values and cultural heritage
- be the primary service provider and monitor of quality control
- be empowered to provide advice which the government honours for its intrinsic value

Your committee should make it crystal clear to the Australian people that your recommendations have been arrived at in full consultation with Indigenous people, for their good and for the good of us all.

Yours sincerely, Jeannette Thiering and Ian Thiering
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